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SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN - USEPA SCIENCE FELLOWS ADVISING, COACHING GOA
ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

KABUL 00002069 001.2 OF 002

SUMMARY

¶1. Two Embassy Science Fellows detailed from the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) have been engaged with their Afghan counterpart National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) since late 2006. The two-year-old Afghan agency is building itself and its environmental management programs from the ground up while trying to address a decades-old legacy of environmental neglect and abuse. The Science Fellows have found themselves focusing mainly on elevating the basic ability of the agency to manage itself and its programs. Beyond that, the Science Fellows have assisted NEPA in revising its new environmental law and regulations, establishing protected areas, laying the groundwork for adopting international treaties on wetlands and migratory species, establishing an online regulatory information center, and building wetlands for wastewater treatment. Their expertise has been effective and much appreciated, given the near absence of local expertise in this field.

¶2. This is the first in a series of three cables on the activities of Post's two USEPA Embassy Science Fellows. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND: BUILDING FROM THE GROUND UP

¶3. Like most of the GoA, NEPA is building its management, technical, and administrative capabilities from the ground up. Prior to NEPA's founding two years ago, environmental governance was almost unknown in Afghanistan. Given that an environmental function has never existed in Afghanistan's central government, a strong case existed for capacity building and institutional development of the environment function.

¶4. Originally a part of the Ministry of Water and Power, NEPA became a stand-alone agency two years ago. Eight regional offices and one central headquarters office in Kabul oversee environmental issues throughout the 34 provinces of Afghanistan. Current staffing of

NEPA is nearly 400. In addition to creating NEPA, the GoA also passed an environmental law by presidential decree in 2006 (amended in March 2007). Since that time, NEPA has been drafting environmental regulations (with assistance from UNEP) and developing enforcement capability.

NEED FOR BASIC ASSISTANCE

¶5. To determine immediate assistance needs of NEPA, the Embassy and USEPA met with NEPA's leadership and the international organizations and NGOs working on environmental issues in Afghanistan. From these meetings, we learned that the GoA had not addressed environmental issues for many years, if at all, and the people at NEPA have little experience in managing an environmental regulatory organization. The strong consensus was that most technical assistance in environmental issues was aimed far above the technical backgrounds of the staff and the organizational capacity of the agency. Our Embassy Science Fellows quickly determined that strengthening the organization should take precedence over the more specialized technical assistance engagement that was originally envisioned. The Science Fellows' assistance to NEPA has therefore focused on developing management and planning skills, such as work planning, budget development and long term agency strategy.

ASSISTANCE ON LAW, TREATIES, PROTECTED AREAS

¶6. In addition to organizational and management assistance at NEPA, the Embassy Science Fellow has also provided review and advice on Afghanistan's amended environment law (to be reported by septel) and the drafted environmental assessment regulations, which are making their way through the review and approval process. NEPA is also working to identify and pursue opportunities for Afghanistan in the

KABUL 00002069 002 OF 002

international environmental arena. With help from the Science Fellow, the GoA is considering accession to two international environmental treaties: the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the Convention on Migratory Species (Bonn Convention). The documentation for accession to these treaties has been prepared, and the GoA is now deciding on accession.

¶7. The Embassy Science Fellow has also been working with NEPA to protect areas of extraordinary environmental value. The lead effort is to create Afghanistan's first national park/protected area around the travertine lakes of Band-i-Amir, a site that we believe may merit eventual designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This has involved advising on a draft law on protected areas, consulting with the Wildlife Conservation Society, Asia Development Bank, and UNEP to work out how to administer the area and to address economic dislocation, and advising NEPA on how to work with other GoA and local entities that have a political stake in the issue. (NOTE: The UNESCO designation requires that the host country already have the legal and administrative machinery in place for protecting the site, as well as some level of funding to put that machinery in motion. In view of the very limited capacity to actually protect the area, we believe this designation is some ways off. END NOTE.)

ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER, WASTEWATER TREATMENT

¶8. Early this year, the Embassy Science Fellow began working with an ongoing USAID online education project at Kabul University to create a virtual environmental information reference center, the Environmental Technical Assistance Center (ETAC) at the Kabul University. ETAC will provide reference information for the use of practitioners, including regulated polluting companies, to manage their operations and materials in an environmentally responsible manner.

¶9. Finally, the Embassy Science Fellow has provided expert input in promoting innovative and environmentally friendly ways of addressing

environmental issues. For example, the Science Fellow has drafted a proposal for a pilot project to construct wetlands for treating wastewater. This low-tech, low-cost approach to wastewater treatment has garnered interest from NGOs and IOs operating in Afghanistan, and we hope to have an agreement to build a project.

COMMENT: FOCUS ON THE BASICS

¶10. Our Embassy Science Fellow colleagues have had a productive tour here (with three months to go for the second Science Fellow). They have brought a rare skill set to Afghanistan, which has very few environmental professionals and virtually no institutional knowledge of how to go about managing its environmental assets. This expertise has been applied to good effect in several areas and is much appreciated by the GoA, which understands its limits in this field.

¶11. In addition, they have adapted their engagement here to fit the rudimentary circumstances that prevail in the Afghan government. Whereas both the Embassy and NEPA had envisioned a purely technical assistance mission, in practice this has changed into something more of a coaching session in how to manage the organization and get its members to produce something. To be sure, the Science Fellows have delivered technical assistance, but without paying attention to the organization and its shortcomings, the technical part of the assistance would have gone for naught.

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